

Gandhi Memorial Lecture 2013

**Towards an Indian Ocean Community:
Creating a Platform for Cooperation in a
Transforming Global Landscape**

by

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October 15, 2013

Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius

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Mr. Chairman, H.E. the High Commissioner of India, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I wish to thank the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for the kind invitation extended to me to deliver this year's Gandhi Memorial Lecture. I feel honoured to have been accorded this privilege. For my wife and I, Mauritius has a very special place in our hearts. We spent almost 5 years in its sylvan environs, made many life-long friends, watching with admiration this country's remarkable passage from an impressive island economy to a regional powerhouse, with a profile quite out of proportion to its seemingly diminutive size. What is of particular satisfaction to us is the significant expansion in Indo-Mauritius ties, encompassing virtually every sector one can think of – political, economic, social and cultural. As I speak, four ships from the Indian Navy's 1st Training Squadron are docked in Port Louis, engaged in important joint training and capacity building exercises. It was not always like this. When I arrived here in 1992, Indo-Mauritian trade and commercial links were still sparse, the Double-Tax Avoidance Agreement was just beginning to wield its magic and India was still seen largely through the prism of its ethnic and cultural links with the island's rainbow population. The latter continue to be significant, but now

there are many more layers of engagement which have so deeply enriched our relations and that is a matter of rejoicing for people like me, who have had the privilege of representing India in this exceptional country.

Among the layers of engagement that have been added to our multi-dimensional relationship, is our partnership in the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation. I can claim, with some justification, to have been present at the birth of this forum, which began life as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative, in March 1995, in the capital of Mauritius, Port Louis. I recall being called in by the then Prime Minister, Anerood Jugnauth, to be told about the impending announcement of the initiative, which originally comprised only 7 invitees – Australia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Oman, Singapore and South Africa, representing littoral countries stretching from Asia to Africa. It was an initiative which India fully supported. Mauritius was also at the forefront from the very beginning, with Mr Kailash Ruhee presiding as the first IOR-ARC Secretary General. That Mauritius would play a key role in its evolution into a significant regional forum, gave us confidence that it would remain aligned with India's overall interests and concerns. In fact, over the past nearly two decades, India and Mauritius have worked very closely together to energize the forum, add substance to agreed areas of cooperation among its members and help formulate a common vision for its future. Soon after the Indian Ocean Initiative was announced, I recall having predicted in a press interview that Port Louis would become for this regional cooperation forum, a nodal centre just as Brussels had for the European Union. The location of the IOR-ARC Secretariat in Mauritius and the appointment of a Secretary-General with an international staff, is a modest but significant step in that direction. It is for me, heartening to see my old friend and colleague, Ambassador Bhagirath, currently occupying this key position, and I wish him every success in his assignment.

The Indian Ocean Rim Initiative has travelled a considerable distance since those early days of 1995. In 1996, the membership was doubled with the addition of Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Yemen. The Initiative was formally launched and renamed the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation in March 1997, with the conclusion of a multilateral treaty, entitled as the Charter of the IOR-ARC. In 1999, Bangladesh, Iran, Thailand and the UAE, too, became members and Seychelles and Comoros joined in 2011 and 2012, respectively. The addition of six Dialogue Partners (Egypt, Japan, United Kingdom, the United States, France and China), and the proposed reciprocal observer status to be accorded to the Indian Ocean Commission is aimed at adding further depth to this platform. In 2010, the forum endorsed a new charter which set as the primary objective, the sustained growth and balanced development of the region and of the member states and to create common ground for regional economic cooperation.

The Association works through 3 Working Groups on (1) Trade and Investment (2) Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum and (3) the IOR Academic Group, respectively.

Incidentally, my own think tank, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), is the lead organization for the third working group.

The Association has a senior officials' meeting every year, while its Council of Ministers, the apex body, meets once in two years. The Chairmanship is rotated on a bi-annual basis. India has been in the chair from 2011-2013, and Australia and Indonesia will follow. It is expected that under the

stewardship of these 3 key member countries, the Association will acquire a distinctive role and influence.

Why is the IOR-ARC important? It is important because in the contemporary global environment, the maritime space has become a critical and indispensable domain. The oceans carry over ninety five percent of global trade and much of the energy component of that trade. As our economies become more globalized, more interconnected, the importance of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) became ever more salient. And the Indian Ocean is by far the most important of the world's ocean spaces. Today it connects the fastest growing economies of India and China with each other and with the rest of the world. Asia and Africa, which form the littoral of the Indian Ocean, are also growing rapidly and constitute a vast reservoir of resources, of expanding markets and rising populations. Currently, over 40% of global trade and 70% of energy trade are carried over the Indian Ocean.

And the Indian Ocean is not merely the water expanse over which trade and shipping links traverse in increasing density. The ocean itself is a source of much wealth, with rich, extensive and virtually untapped resources. For all these reasons, the Indian Ocean today is becoming a centre of gravity of global economic and commercial activity. This means that the littoral states of the ocean gain in importance and influence and their global footprint becomes more prominent. Therefore, there is a compelling logic in maintaining a platform on which these countries can come together and cooperate in managing the ocean space which they share and create mutually beneficial development opportunities for themselves and for the region.

In a very real sense, the IOR-ARC represents the return of history to our region. The well-known scholar of the Indian Ocean, Pearson, has pointed out:

“...the Indian Ocean is by far the oldest of the seas in history, in terms of it being used and traversed by humans”,

... it has a long history of contacts and distant voyages done by people from its coasts and then a brief hiatus, maybe 150 years when Westerners controlled things...”

Another well-known historian, Andre Gunder Frank has similarly pointed out that

“(the Indian Ocean was) central in global history in all the millennia upto 1800 and now is re-emerging again as central.”

This history is important for us to understand and be aware of. The Indian Ocean littoral, stretching from the Far East to the Bay of Bengal, to the Arabian Sea and the eastern seaboard of Africa, was an extra-ordinarily cosmopolitan space, connecting the diverse cultures of the peoples of Asia and Africa. This constant engagement, sustained over the millennia, led to an incredible enrichment of the cultures spread across the ocean, through the exchange of goods, peoples, ideas and religious belief. This was the ancient version of the globalized world, nourished by the monsoon winds and ocean currents, which bound the littoral countries of the ocean in a mostly benign embrace, the sounds and colours of which still echo across the region. The sense of neighbourhood, of familiarity, of engagement nurtured by curiosity and a sense of adventure, was brutally interrupted by the debilitating dominance of the West over the seas since 1800. The rhythm of the monsoons, filling the sails of elegant timber vessels, criss-crossing the ocean was overcome by the all weather iron steamships. The Indian Ocean was pushed to the margins. Its rich and prosperous states were reduced to colonial or semi-colonial status. The myriad links that connected our countries and peoples were rudely snapped. The metropolitan country to colony links became the dominant feature of the 19th century and much of the twentieth century. So swiftly and completely were the

ancient ties in the region severed that we soon became strangers to one another with only dim and receding memories of our cosmopolitan heritage. We became islands unto ourselves, overwhelmed by the power of arms and of ideas of an ascendant West. So pervasive was this control over our lives that even though the colonial age came to an end in the second half of the 20th century, we are only now beginning to regain that ancient sense of neighbourhood and common destiny, but in a vastly transformed contemporary context. For me, the IOR-ARC is a historical necessity because it provides a potential platform for the peoples of the Indian Ocean to reconnect with one another, discover their deep-rooted affinities, celebrate their shared cultural sensibilities and chart their own destiny for the future.

Though the IOR-ARC has been in existence for almost 2 decades, it has mostly been perceived as a side-show, compared to other regional and sub-regional fora. It has not met even once at the Summit level and its record of implementing even agreed initiatives is not very encouraging. When we say that the IOR-ARC is based on “open regionalism” what we really wish to convey is that it must not detract from our pursuit of other more serious pursuit of “preferential regionalism” through free trade agreements, regional trading arrangements or common markets. We have a thin agenda of cooperation, focusing on maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, academic and S&T cooperation and cultural exchanges. Even this limited agenda cannot be pursued with any seriousness with the current institutional infrastructure we possess. There is a modest secretariat as we have seen. There is a Fisheries Support Unit in Oman, a Regional Centre for Science and Transfer and Technology in Tehran and a Maritime Transport Council, also located at Oman. What this demonstrates is the unwelcome reality that there is an acute asymmetry between the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean region and the marginal

importance of the IOR-ARC. Unless this asymmetry is addressed, the IOR-ARC will remain a pale shadow of its more energetic cousins in the region, in particular regional and sub-regional groups like the ASEAN, the EAS, BIMSTEC, SAARC, GCC, AU, ECOWAS and SADC among others.

What should the member countries of the IOR-ARC do in order to align the forum with what all will agree is the growing geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean?

What I will put forward is my personal view and Mauritius will have a key role to play in this scenario. I take my cue from the very important speech made by Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam at the official opening of the National Dialogue on the Ocean Economy on July 22, 2013. Dr. Ramgoolam spoke of the need to define a vision for the Ocean Economy as a new pillar of national economy and ensuring national commitment to this vision. He recommended an integrated approach to all policies, regulatory frameworks and strategies with respect to all ocean-related activities and a plan to build capacity, coordinate infrastructure development, streamline resource allocation and provide a fiscal regime for all ocean-related activities. The Prime Minister spoke in the context of Mauritius as a maritime country. However, several of his ideas can well be adapted to the multilateral framework of the IOR-ARC.

Firstly, we need a vision for the IOR-ARC. To my mind, this vision needs to draw upon the history of the region; it needs to promote the sense of affinity and common heritage that all our member countries share, placing this in the contemporary context of a vastly changed and still changing international landscape. It should aim at the creation of an Indian Ocean Community on the pattern of Dr. Ramgoolam's concept of an Ocean Economy.

A good start in this direction was made with the first IOR-ARC Economic and Business Conference, at the level of Trade Ministers, which was co-hosted by India and Mauritius on 4-5 July 2013 and inaugurated by Dr Ramgoolam. The conference evinced an enthusiastic response from Member States, with participation by 12 Ministers and 190 Businesses. The highlight of the conference was the session on the Blue Economy, co-chaired by the Foreign Ministers of Mauritius and Seychelles.

Secondly, rather than duplicating what other regional or sub-regional bodies are already engaged in, why not agree upon an agenda that is more focused on the maritime domain which is the defining characteristic of the Indian Ocean region? This will include issues of maritime security and safety, the preservation of the ocean environment, particularly in view of the impact of climate change, infrastructure development in terms of ports and harbours on the Indian Ocean littoral, the cooperative and sustainable development of marine resources in the Indian Ocean and capacity building in the management of the ocean space across the region. The Mauritius Oceanographic Institute has an important role to play in capacity building. There are similar institutes in other member countries including India. The IOR-ARC could establish a network of these institutes to pursue common research and capacity building programmes.

Thirdly, in order to graduate to a powerful and effective institution, the IOR-ARC will need the political commitment at the highest level of its members. It is only if the forum is elevated to the summit level that it will be taken seriously. Unless and until this happens, the IOR-ARC will remain a second class citizen in the family of established and prospective regional bodies for cooperation. The Mauritius Prime Minister underscored the importance of the Ocean Economy as the country's new pillar of development and committed

his own personal engagement with the implementation of the initiative because of its strategic nature. We need the same high level commitment by leaders of the IOR-ARC to a vision which reflects the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean.

I believe that Mauritius can become a thought leader in this regard precisely because its stakes in the ocean economy are so manifest. Mauritius is not a small country. The EEZ alone, after the historic Mascarene Plateau Agreement of 2012, is estimated at 2.3 million square kms. It is, therefore, a major Indian Ocean power. Mauritius is also the accepted nodal centre of the IOR-ARC, since all members countries have accepted the location of the Secretariat in this country. Therefore, it is only appropriate that this country take the lead in proposing initiatives to strengthen the organization and make it more relevant to its members. Mauritius is where we resumed our journey as Indian Ocean neighbours. We look to Mauritius to speed our journey to our shared destination.

I thank you for your attention.

15 October 2013